

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 20 August 2023**  
**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A – Lectionary 20**

**1st Reading: *Isaiah 56:1, 6-8***

**Psalm: 67**

**2nd Reading: *Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32***

**Gospel: *Matthew 15:10-28***

**Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø***

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, the weather today confirms that it is still summertime, and summertime in our culture is traditionally the time for various types of vacations, as we've discussed already over the past few weeks, and so it is sometimes the season for road trips. We've heard from Virgil, Tim, and Sue about their road trip to South Dakota this year. Coral and I are planning an autumn road trip to New York later in September for her 50<sup>th</sup> high school reunion.

And in our Gospel readings this summer we've been on a sort of road trip with Jesus, as he has travelled around the countryside of Galilee and the surrounding areas. He hasn't exactly been on vacation, though. Indeed, we have seen that he has *tried* to get away from the crowds for a little retreat to spend time in prayer, but he hasn't been very successful in this. Crowds keep following him, asking him to heal them, feed them, take care of them, and as we have also seen, Jesus has never refused to help anyone.

In today's Gospel, however, it looks like Jesus is about to refuse to help a woman who is following him and begging for mercy. And what is different about this woman compared to everyone else Jesus has helped in the past is that she is not Jewish. So, at first, Jesus just simply ignores her as if she wasn't there at all, but when his disciples draw Jesus' attention to her, urging him to send her away, he replies in a somewhat surprising manner: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." *Is Jesus going to refuse her because she is not Jewish?*

I think that sometimes we have the impression of Jesus that since he is God incarnate that even as a human being he had unlimited abilities. He could just wave his hand and anything he wanted would happen, with no real effort on his part. But I think we have seen in our recent Gospel readings that this was not the case. Jesus was, and is, a human being besides being God. And although he differs from the rest of us in that he never sinned, he still had all the limitations we as human beings experience.

So once we acknowledge this, we can understand a little better Jesus' own feelings about his ministry. Yes, he wants to heal as many people as he can, and spread his teachings to everyone he can reach, but he does have limited time and energy to go around. So, is he here going to draw the line and say, "I just can't do it all. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And then he says to the woman herself: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

This is extremely harsh language. Indeed, today it would be considered racist. Jesus is implying that the Jews were God's chosen people, his children, whereas the Gentiles, anyone who was not Jewish, were "dogs". And dogs in First Century culture were not nice pets who were just as welcome in the family as were children. Dogs were scavengers, tolerated but not loved. So Jesus is saying in effect to the woman that she was not worthy, that she was to be considered less than human.

Some modern commentators have suggested that this was indeed what Jesus thought, and that the woman in her response taught Jesus not to be a racist. But if that is what someone really thinks about Jesus then they haven't paid very close attention. Of course, we know that Jesus did have every intention of healing the woman's daughter, and that this was just a test. But who was Jesus testing? The woman? I don't think so. I think that just as in other cases Jesus is here testing his own disciples. Remember the feeding of the 5,000? In the Fourth Gospel, John tells us that Jesus was testing his disciples because he already knew what he was going to do. And here Matthew is telling us that Jesus is doing exactly the same thing. He knows what he is going to do, and he knows the intensity of the woman's pleas and of her faith.

So he is making a point to the disciples never to write anyone off because of who they are or what group they belong to. For the Jews of Jesus' day, this meant any Gentiles. For us, it means anyone who is not from our own ethnic background, whether they are Black, Hispanic, Arab, Chinese, Aboriginal, or for Norwegians like myself it even means Swedes. All are welcome. All are eligible to receive equal grace from God, and all should be treated by us as being the same as ourselves.

After all, we ourselves are all Gentiles, who have graciously been given grace by God. We are not the chosen people of the House of Israel. We are the dogs, whom God has allowed to receive the children's crumbs. And we are all sinners whom God has forgiven. In the Church of England, there is a prayer, from the Book of Common Prayer, which is often said before Communion which draws on the imagery of this story from Matthew's Gospel:

*We do not presume to come to this your table, O merciful Lord,  
trusting in our own righteousness,  
but in your abundant and great mercies.  
We are not worthy so much as to gather up  
the crumbs under your table;  
but you are the same Lord  
whose character is always to have mercy.  
Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord,  
so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ,  
and to drink his blood,  
that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body,  
and our souls washed through his most precious blood,  
and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*

This is what Jesus is teaching his disciples in our Gospel today. God treats all of us in the same way, giving his grace to all, so we should also be equally gracious to everyone we meet.

This is exactly what Isaiah is talking about in our first reading:

“And the foreigners [that is, us Gentiles] who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer.”

Likewise the Psalmist this morning tells us:

Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.  
  
Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide all the nations on earth.

The word “Gentiles” means the nations, the peoples, the foreigners, so we are all welcome and all included.

But unfortunately, it seems that some who followed Jesus thought that they had learned this lesson *too* well, so much so that they decided that the Gentiles were welcome, but that the Jews had ceased to be because they seemed to have rejected Jesus. And so Paul needed to write in his letter to the Romans, as we read today:

“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!... God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable... So they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy.

We all need God’s mercy, and it is always good for us to remember that we are the ones in need of the crumbs. We are not the ones to decide who deserves to receive them. Everyone is in need of God’s grace and is welcome here to receive it.

So as we come to Communion this morning, let us receive it with thanksgiving toward God who has had mercy on all of us, and has made us worthy not because of anything we have done, or based on who we are, where we were born, but based on the love of Jesus Christ for all of us. And let us then strive with our own hands to do God’s work in the world, and to bring God’s grace to everyone we meet through the gifts the Holy Spirit has given to each of us.

Amen!

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